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ABSTRACT

This study compares the attitudes towards desegregation among three groups of parents. It attempts to determine whether parents' support for desegregation is related to the degree of their children's participation in a successful integration program. It is hypothesized that the most favorable attitudes would be found among those parents whose children were most directly affected by the integration effort. Taken into consideration are attitudinal differences between minority and majority racial groups. Findings are presented, and it is concluded that proximity to a successful school integration program (and to information about that program) might help explain the pattern of increasing white support for desegregation. (Author/EB)

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THE PROXIMITY HYPOTHESIS OF PARENTS' SUPPORT FOR DESEGREGATION

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Introduction

Over the years, a great deal of attention has been directed to the opposition of white parents to the racial desegregation of public schools. This opposition has taken a variety of forms, including violent confrontations in Little Rock and Boston, withdrawal from public school systems and other varieties of "white flight", the election of candidates who have pledged to support the "neighborhood school" and so forth. Yet despite these well-publicized patterns of opposition, the most appropriate general conclusion is that, in the words of the United States Commission on Civil Rights, "desegregation works." That is, "citizens feel that compliance with the law is in the best interests of their children and their communities" (U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, 1976, p. 293). Furthermore, much of the opposition expressed at the outset of desegregation programs appears to be temporary. After reviewing survey data from almost one thousand school districts, the Civil Rights Commission concluded that "both white parents and minority parents generally support desegregation. Moreover, after desegregation, there was a dramatic positive change in the attitudes of white parents" (U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, 1976, p. 148).

The increase in whites' support seems attributable in large part to the fact that most desegregation programs have been implemented successfully. According to Gary Orfield (1975), the first weeks and months of a school integration program represent a crisis period, during which administrators attempt to provide reassurance to parents, ease tensions in the school, and and create an orderly routine. Once the crisis has passed and it becomes evident that desegregation is proceeding smoothly, initial doubts and worries are set aside, and support for integration increases among many of those who were previously opposed. This interpretation represents one variation of the contact principle of intergroup relations, as initially set forth by

Robin Williams (1947) and by Gordon Allport (1954). In brief, the contact principle suggests that under certain favorable conditions, interaction among members of different groups can increase mutual knowledge and understanding and thereby promote support for continued contacts.

In the present study, we examine a related proposition which might be called the proximity hypothesis of support for desegregation. Specifically, in comparing attitudes towards desegregation among three groups of parents whose children were involved to varying degrees in a successful school integration program, we expect that the most favorable attitudes will be found among those parents whose children were most directly affected by the integration effort. The rationale is as follows: as desegregation proceeds smoothly, the parents of those children who are most directly involved in the program will have the most up-to-date and most accurate information about the program's success. It is assumed that as positive information accumulates, fears will be disconfirmed, leading to growing support for desegregation.

The present report represents only a preliminary and partial test of this assumption, in that we do not investigate patterns of information flow. Nor do the data permit the study of attitude change. Rather we simply attempt to determine whether parents' support for desegregation is related to the degree of their children's participation in a school integration program.

Procedures

The integration program which is described here was implemented in twelve elementary schools in a county-wide suburban district near Washington, D.C. By all accounts, the desegregation effort was successfully implemented: Academic

and behavioral patterns in the participating schools generally resembled those of previous years, and organized opposition diminished as the year progressed. Shortly before the end of the program's first year, randomly selected samples of white and minority group parents of students in the twelve schools were mailed a questionnaire assessing attitudes towards desegregation in general and towards specific methods of desegregation (such as free choice options, large scale reassignment of students, etc.). The questionnaire also asked parents to evaluate the district's desegregation plan and to rate their child's "overall educational experience" during the school year which was just ending. Because the integration effort was directed only at certain grade levels (which varied between schools), it was possible to separate responses of "directly involved" parents (those with children in newly desegregated classes) from those of the "marginally involved" (parents of children whose classrooms were not included in the program). For example, if the desegregation program within a certain school was limited to grades 1-3, parents of children in those classes were placed in the "directly involved" sample, while parents of fourth-through sixth-graders were considered "marginally involved." In addition, the same questionnaire was sent to a sample of parents of children in thirteen nearby schools, which did not participate in the integration effort, but which were, for the most part, naturally desegregated by virtue of their location in racially mixed neighborhoods. The two groups of schools were generally similar with respect to racial and socioeconomic composition.

A total of 1,685 completed questionnaires were returned. In this sample, "uninvolved" parents were somewhat overrepresented (55 percent), with the

"directly involved" and "marginally involved" comprising 32 and 12 percent, respectively. About one-third of the respondents identified themselves as minority-group members (mainly black, but also Asian and Hispanic). All sub-samples were essentially middle class, although whites enjoyed a slight edge in socio-economic status over non-whites.

It is important to note that the hypothesized relationship between attitudes and proximity is not likely to be confounded by sampling bias or self-selection. That is, we do not believe that the "directly involved" sample, which is expected to show strongest support for desegregation, includes disproportionate numbers of parents who were already favorable to school integration before the program began. First of all, children's participation in the desegregation effort was not voluntary. Schools and classes in which enrollment patterns were adjusted were selected by county educational officials. Secondly, while the "directly involved" and "marginally involved" samples consisted primarily of parents whose children were enrolled in schools which had been racially unbalanced,[1] the children of the "uninvolved" parents attended schools that were, for the most part, naturally desegregated (i.e., located in racially mixed neighborhoods). Thus, if bias exists in the sample, it could be a stronger prior support for desegregation among "uninvolved" parents, which would, of course, work against the confirmation of our hypothesis.

Results

Mean scores for each item were tabulated for groups based on respondents' racial identification and degree of children's involvement in the desegregation program. Thus, there were three categories (directly, marginally, and not involved)within each of the two racial groups (white and minority). In order to compare responses to the seven items (some of which were scored differently), mean scores for each cell were converted to percentages of the maximum possible score for each item.

Before considering the proximity hypothesis, we feel that it is important

to note that the attitudes of white and minority parents were, in general, somewhat similar. Both groups showed fairly high levels of support for the principle of desegregation, perceived the county's desegregation program to be successful, and were satisfied with the quality of their children's school experience during the preceeding year. Among both groups, levels of support drop sharply when parents were asked to consider specific modes of desegregation. Of the four approaches mentioned in the questionnaire (large scale reassignment of pupils, limited reassignment, free choice between schools, and redrawing of school boundaries), each group rejected all but the free-choice option. But while the overall profiles of minority and white attitudes are parallel, minority parents expressed more favorable attitudes on all seven items. Most of these differences are substantial and would not be likely to occur by chance.

To test the proximity hypothesis, it is necessary to consider attitudinal differences within racial groups. In general, these differences are quite small.[2] Nevertheless, the responses of white parents offer some support for the hypothesis, while the pattern is less clear among minority group respondents. Among whites, the "directly involved" parents exceeded the other two groups on all seven items: support for desegregation as a general principle, support for four specific approaches to desegregation, favorable perception of the county's school desegregation program, and satisfaction with their children's school experiences during the preceeding year. No clear patterns emerged when the responses of "marginally involved" and "uninvolved" white parents were compared. Interestingly, the "uninvolved" group had a more favorable view of the desegregation program than did the "marginals," which, of course, is not consistent with the proximity hypothesis. Similarly, responses of the minority group sample offer little

support for the hypothesis. The most favorable orientations towards desegregation were found among the "marginally involved" on five items and among the "directly involved" on two. "Uninvolved" parents tended to show a lower level of support on most items. As stated previously, those differences were not significant.

Conclusions

We believe that this study offers insights into factors which influence the attitudes of white parents towards school desegregation. Although the margins were narrow, the group of whites who consistently expressed greatest support for desegregation was the subsample of parents whose children were most directly involved in an integration program. We presume that the pro-desegregation orientation among these parents is partly a result of their proximity to sources of positive information about the daily progress of the integration effort. On the other hand, it could be argued that this finding merely represents a grudging acceptance of a fait accompli, or an attempt to rationalize their children's involvement. This possibility cannot be entirely discounted. However, it may be worth noting that in the single item which did not directly pertain to desegregation (i.e., satisfaction with children's overall school experience in the previous year), the "directly involved" parents still came out on top. This might indicate that this group was genuinely pleased with what happened in their children's schools.

It should be apparent that this study raises more questions than it answers. We need to know more, for example, about the extent to which support for desegregation actually changes, and also about the dynamics of attitude formation among minority parents. Nevertheless, we tentatively

conclude that proximity to a successful school integration program (and to information about that program) might help to explain the pattern of increasing white support for desegregation which was reported by the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights. We therefore suggest that once an integration program is functioning smoothly, educators should not be reluctant to "go public" with news of their program's success.

TABLE 1: PARENTS' ATTITUDES TOWARDS DESEGREGATION (BY PARENTS' RACIAL IDENTIFICATION AND DEGREE OF CHILDREN'S PARTICIPATION IN A MANDATORY DESEGREGATION PROGRAM)

Item	MINORITY PARENTS			MAJORITY (WHITE) PARENTS			Significant Differences
	Directly Involved	Marginally Involved	Uninvolved	Directly Involved	Marginally Involved	Uninvolved	
What are your feelings about school desegregation? (100=strongly support 0=strongly oppose)	77.0	75.4	76.2	68.8	60.1	64.8	h, i
How do you feel about these methods of desegregating schools							
a) large-scale reassignment of students	26.0	26.8	23.4	10.3	3.4	6.0	g, h, i
b) limited reassignment of students	46.0	44.2	41.1	33.5	24.0	22.1	e, g, h, i
c) free choice between schools with different programs	70.6	71.3	63.8	69.9	65.0	64.9	e, g, h, i
d) redrawing school boundaries	37.9	42.6	40.1	37.0	29.1	33.8	
In general, how successful do you think the new desegregation program has been? (100=very successful 0=very unsuccessful)	65.9	68.5	68.0	61.9	53.6	59.6	h
How would you rate your child's overall experience in this school? (100=excellent, 0=poor)	72.0	78.0	69.6	71.2	70.0	69.3	

Note: Each of the mean scores in this table is presented as a percentage of the maximum possible rating. High scores in each case refer to the most positive or most favorable rating.

Code for significant differences ($p < .05$):

a. Minority parents: directly involved vs. marginally involved
b. Minority parents: directly involved vs. uninvolved
c. Minority parents: marginally involved vs. uninvolved
d. White parents: directly involved vs. marginally involved
e. White parents: directly involved vs. uninvolved
f. White parents: marginally involved vs. uninvolved
g. Directly involved parents: white vs. minority
h. Marginally involved parents: white vs. minority
i. Uninvolved parents: white vs. minority

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Footnotes

1. Of the twelve schools which were included in the program, seven had previously been well below the county guidelines for minority enrollments and one had greatly exceeded these guidelines. The remaining schools had already achieved some degree of racial balance, but were included in hopes of further improvement.

2. Of the many comparisons made within racial groups, in only two cases were we able to be quite certain (95 percent) that the differences did not occur by chance. In both cases (limited pupil reassignments and free-choice options), levels of support among "directly involved" whites exceeded those of the "uninvolved" white parents.